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# India After Indira: The Succession Question

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An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office of  
Near East-South Asia Analysis. It was coordinated  
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welcome and may be directed to the Chief, South  
Asia Division, [redacted]

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**India After Indira:  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 30 November 1982  
was used in this report.*

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at 65 is healthy and seems determined to maintain her highly centralized form of personal rule, at least until the general elections scheduled for 1985. When the prime minister dies, the President of India will appoint an interim prime minister—the senior Cabinet member—until the majority party in parliament selects a new leader. Gandhi's purge of Congress Party politicians with a potential national constituency will probably make the selection of a successor less smooth than similar transitions in her party in 1964 and 1966. India's strong democratic institutions and traditions, however, should ensure political stability, at least in the immediate post-Gandhi era.

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Gandhi is preparing for the eventual succession of her son Rajiv. She has made Rajiv her chief adviser and confidant, given him authority and responsibility in the Congress Party, and introduced him to the world's most important leaders.

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Although many Indians seem willing to accept Rajiv, his chances of retaining power are less certain. His position in Congress Party affairs depends entirely upon his mother. He has occasionally abused his prerogatives by treating Congress Party politicians with contempt. His performance on the political hustings and in parliament has been lackluster.

Rajiv's chances are enhanced by the dearth of credible challengers. 25X1  
Gandhi's estranged daughter-in-law, Maneka, who also claims to be an heir to the Nehru political legacy, is a focus of Congress Party dissidence. But she lacks broad political support to succeed Gandhi as prime minister. The Cabinet includes several well-known politicians, but they have no national constituencies.

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Gandhi's successor, in our view, will probably continue to seek a balance in its foreign policy as India reasserts its leadership in the nonaligned movement, but Moscow is likely to retain a central place in India's foreign affairs strategy. India's preoccupation with the potential security threat from Pakistan, New Delhi's perception of the Soviets as reliable arms suppliers, and the economic relationships between India and the Soviet Union are powerful inducements for continued close ties. Gandhi's successor, however, may prove receptive to opportunities to improve and expand relations with the United States.

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## India After Indira: The Succession Question

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### The Setting

Returned to power by the "Indira Wave" of 1980 after a three-year hiatus, Prime Minister Gandhi is the dominant political personality in India today. Despite growing factionalism and dissent in her party, Gandhi's Congress Party remains the nation's largest and strongest political organization. In contrast, the opposition is fragmented among numerous small parties and appears incapable of posing a credible threat to Gandhi in the near future.

Most political indicators point to the continued supremacy of the Congress Party over the next two to three years. It controls about two-thirds of the seats in parliament, and Congress Party chief ministers preside over the legislative assemblies in most of India's 22 states. The Congress candidate for president, Zail Singh, was elected in July for a five-year term by a wide margin. Singh is known for his long service to the Nehru family and his loyalty to the Prime Minister. We believe Gandhi and her son Rajiv view him as a potential ally should a parliamentary crisis over the next five years threaten the Prime Minister's tenure.

Prime Minister Gandhi's death or incapacitation would pose no immediate threat to India's political stability, in our view. In contrast to many developing countries, India has maintained effective democratic institutions that have weathered the death of Nehru, the Emergency of 1975-77, and the tumultuous Janata period. The Indian public values law and order, and the nation's still stable democratic institutions would probably ensure a calm transition during and after the anticipated public grief for the popular Prime Minister.

### Sources of Concern

Still, some signs suggest uncertain times for Gandhi's party because the Congress has become essentially a one-woman organization. Gandhi has increased her

personal power since 1980, but at the cost of weakening the Congress and some government institutions. Public speculation is widespread that unless she rebuilds the grass-roots party organization and restores at least a modicum of authority to leaders outside New Delhi, Congress could begin to fade—perhaps even before the 1985 parliamentary elections—as the predominant political force.

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Gandhi, in our view, fears that delegating authority will lead to challenges to her control of party and government affairs. Gandhi clearly wants to dominate party affairs and control appointments of central and state legislative party elites. She has aggressively intervened in the affairs of the state units of her party. Gandhi has broken the hold of the state Congress Party bosses and has suppressed the emergence of independent regional power centers. Their place has been taken by Congress chief ministers without a state power base who owe office solely to Gandhi's good graces.

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Gandhi has isolated potential challengers from the center of power, but in so doing she may have weakened government institutions. The Prime Minister has surrounded herself with a largely incompetent Cabinet that rubberstamps her policies more than it weighs and advises on policy options. Gandhi has directly controlled, at various times, some key portfolios—such as Defense and Atomic Energy—and she has supervised key government functions such as security and intelligence to monitor the opposition as well as dissidents in her Congress Party.

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### Indian Succession Mechanisms

According to the constitution, the president appoints the prime minister, but the constitution is vague on how the president should make the selection. We

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***Powers of the President***

*The president of India holds a primarily ceremonial office with important discretionary powers of appointment and the authority to dissolve parliament. Most importantly, he appoints the prime minister and, on the prime minister's advice, the Cabinet. Except when no political party singly or in coalition is in a clear majority in the lower house of parliament, the president must invite the leader of the majority party in parliament to form a government. The president can dissolve parliament—as Sanjiva Reddy did in 1979—when no one party or coalition of parties can command a majority. The president is also empowered by the constitution to declare a state of emergency, on the advice of the prime minister in the event of:*

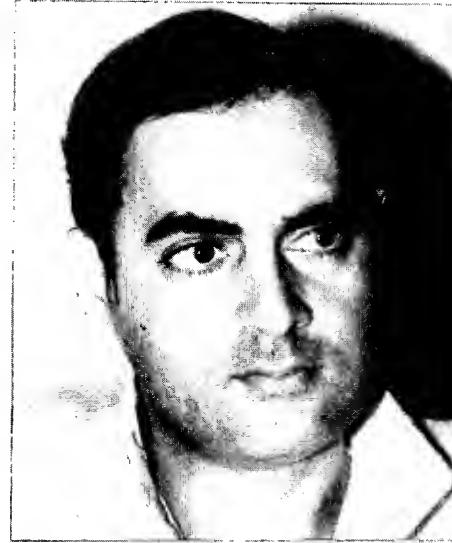
- *War, external aggression, or internal disruption.*
- *Collapse of the constitutional machinery in any individual state.*
- *Financial breakdown of the federal government or any state government.*

believe if the prime minister dies in office, the senior Cabinet member would become interim prime minister until the majority party in parliament selects a new leader

Before Gandhi's election as Prime Minister in 1966, the Congress Party had both a strong central leadership under the prime minister and a second tier of strong regional leaders who, while deferring to the center, maintained an independent power base. Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, ran his party and governed India with solid, regional leaders. These party bosses—often known as the Syndicate—were largely responsible for selecting Lal Bahadur Shastri as Prime Minister in 1964 and Indira Gandhi over Morarji Desai for the office in 1966.

**Gandhi's Succession Plans**

Gandhi's actions since the accidental death of her son Sanjay in 1980 have left no doubt that she wants her elder son Rajiv to succeed her as prime minister.



Rajiv Gandhi

Contact Press Images ©

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US officials in New Delhi report that Gandhi considers most issues from the standpoint of their impact on her domestic position and particularly on the chances for Rajiv to succeed her. The Prime Minister has stated publicly that the people will follow India's democratic tradition and ultimately decide who is to lead them, but she is obviously making every effort to make sure they choose her son.

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Gandhi's intentions for Rajiv's succession are clear to the diplomatic community, the Congress and opposition parties, and the Indian public. Rajiv accompanied his mother on her celebrated visits to Washington and Moscow in July and September. Ambassadors posted

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### Rajiv's Chances

If Gandhi dies in office within the next two or three years, we believe that Rajiv will probably be appointed prime minister. Most Congress politicians probably view Rajiv's succession as an important element of continuity in what is likely to be a rapidly changing political environment. Few challengers to Rajiv exist within the Congress because Gandhi has systematically weeded out experienced politicians with a national constituency who could become a possible alternative to Rajiv.

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Most Congress Party members seem to have already accepted the notion of Rajiv's succession. Among Congress members in a key southern state, for instance, the US Consulate in Madras found Rajiv to be the only political contender after Gandhi. Congress members of parliament largely believe Rajiv is the sole party official who could replace Gandhi and maintain Congress's position as the principal national party. Rajiv's supporters in various positions in the party also view him as the logical successor to the single-leader tradition in the Congress. They see India's unity and maintenance of a strong central government as synonymous with Congress Party unity under the Nehru family.

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to New Delhi openly curry favor with Rajiv in Gandhi's presence at diplomatic functions. Several fawning state leaders of the Congress Party have urged Gandhi to appoint Rajiv to more responsible positions in the party. Opposition parties criticize Gandhi in parliament and query her why a mere member of parliament is given special treatment by Indian Government officials. They also ask why, on trips abroad, Rajiv is always listed second to Gandhi on protocol lists when more senior government officials travel with the Prime Minister.

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Some of Rajiv's lukewarm supporters, however, have nagging doubts about his abilities and political instincts. Reports appear in the press with notable frequency that a growing minority in the Congress Party is apprehensive about Rajiv's ability to lead the party after Gandhi and contends that he is an unsuitable candidate to succeed his mother. In our view, a number of these restless and unhappy politicians—most of whom do not hold important positions within

the party—see the grooming of Rajiv as further weakening the party by suppressing the talent within it. The dissident element of Congress is angered by Rajiv's perceived arrogance and roughshod treatment of some state party leaders and government officials, according to reputable Indian journalists. [redacted]

We believe that Rajiv's eminence in Congress Party affairs is entirely derivative. He has yet to establish a clear public image, a record of performance independent of his mother, or a political base of his own. Rajiv lacks both his mother's flair and an insight for politics and may prove incapable of defending his leadership after Gandhi's departure from politics. His sole credential may be the fact that he is Indira's son. [redacted]

but there has been a notable absence of inspiration or substance in his public statements. He reportedly engineered the successful farmer's rally in New Delhi in March 1981 to support his mother's policies, but beyond that Rajiv has shown a palpable lack of talent in political affairs. [redacted]

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Rajiv mismanaged the Congress campaign in three North Indian state assembly elections in May 1982. He alienated a number of veteran Congress politicians and denied places on tickets to others in two states, causing them to leave the party. These defections jeopardized the formation of Congress ministries in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. He predicted Congress would win at least 100 seats in West Bengal, but it won only 49. Gandhi's Congress did best in Kerala, where Rajiv failed to campaign. According to the US Embassy, voters were indifferent to Rajiv despite extensive public exposure and his heavy involvement in the campaign. [redacted]

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#### Alternative Contenders

Should Congress reject Rajiv, it could turn to a "syndicate" of a small number of prominent Congress members of parliament in Gandhi's Cabinet. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, Industry Minister N. D. Tiwari, and Defense Minister R. Venkataraman are all generally respected in the party, but none has a national political constituency. This shared characteristic, in our view, makes it likely that a prime minister chosen from the Cabinet would be a caretaker unable to win the support of various party factions. [redacted]

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A political personality with a potential national following and name recognition is Gandhi's estranged daughter-in-law Maneka. Ambitious and ruthless—some Indian political observers say she is much like the Prime Minister—Maneka has increasingly become the focus for Congress Party dissidents who were selected by her deceased husband Sanjay for office and since his death have been cast aside. [redacted]

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Rajiv's reserve frustrates many Congress politicians, who complain that he is too inaccessible to ever appeal to the wide spectrum of the Congress electorate. One Congress politician from Rajiv's home state of Uttar Pradesh claims that Rajiv's close aides are bureaucratic and officious even by Indian norms and go to considerable lengths to shield him from the public. [redacted]

We believe Rajiv's performance as a member of parliament has been lackluster. His maiden—and only—parliamentary speech earlier this year was politely received by the press and the opposition parties,

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Gandhi family (Sanjay, Rajiv, Indira, Rajiv's children, Maneka, and Sonia)

India Today

We believe Maneka is not a serious threat to Rajiv's succession, but she represents a possible obstacle to him. To become a serious rival to Rajiv, Maneka would have to join the Congress Party and serve as a member of parliament.

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US Embassy officers in New Delhi believe that Maneka could erode public support for Rajiv by making an issue of his wife Sonia's refusal to become an Indian citizen. Indian journalists also ask how a prime minister privy to national security information could be married to an Italian citizen

Should the Prime Minister decide over the next few years that Rajiv is ill suited to politics, she could turn to another relative—perhaps her distant cousin Arun Nehru—rather than Rajiv, as her designated political heir. Some Indian journalists have noted that Maneka's 3-year-old son, Varun, is the only full-blooded Indian grandchild of the Prime Minister, and perhaps for that reason they speculate that Gandhi could eventually make her peace with Maneka.

**Coalition Leadership.** If, as prime minister, Rajiv fails to assert strong control over India's pluralistic democracy, or if no strong political personality

emerges in the post-Gandhi era, aspirants for national leadership might try to build coalitions out of the rival factions within the Congress and from the opposition parties. Many opposition leaders, such as H. N. Bahuguna, have moved in and out of Congress in the past and maintain ties in the Congress Party. Coalition governments, however, would probably be unstable and subject to fragmentation. Coalitions such as those during the Janata rule (1975-77) have been weak and short lived, and a succession of governments unable to complete their full five-year term would be the probable result

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**Possible Role for the Military.** The military has always prided itself on its obedience to the civilian government, but, in the absence of strong leadership in the post-Gandhi period, a power grab by the military cannot be ruled out. In our view, only if a series of weak, incompetent governments—probably coalitions in which no party had decisive influence—failed to handle a political, economic, or security crisis would the military consider stepping in to restore order. Prolonged political incompetence by a civilian government could mobilize not only the military, but also elements of the political community that would begin to demand military involvement.

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**Implications for the United States**  
Despite Gandhi's strong and decisive role in foreign affairs, we do not expect significant changes in Indian foreign policy after her departure from politics. We believe Indian Government policies generally reflect basic national interests upon which most or all potential successors agree. We do not expect a sudden change in Indian foreign policy, regardless of who succeeds Gandhi. The Indian leadership probably will attempt to maintain a balance between the Communist and Western countries while enhancing India's stature in the nonaligned movement.

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Moscow is likely to retain a central place in India's foreign policy. A core of shared interests is likely to

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endure any change in government in New Delhi. Indo-Soviet ties rest on a firm foundation that includes Soviet diplomatic support against Pakistan and China, military supplies and equipment on easy terms, and a broad commercial relationship under which India essentially trades low-quality consumer goods and agricultural products for Soviet arms and oil. [redacted]

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In the longer term, however, Gandhi's successor may prove open to opportunities to strengthen relations with the United States. Rajiv Gandhi, for example, is commonly known to have upper middle class values and to admire Western culture and democratic institutions. US diplomats in New Delhi report that his education, personal lifestyle, and political views are Western oriented. [redacted]

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[redacted] he is essentially capitalist and pro-Western in international orientation. Rajiv surrounds himself, moreover, with advisers who advocate free enterprise. [redacted]

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## Appendix



Zail Singh

Sygma ©



Pranab K. Mukherjee

Delhi Recorder

President of India Zail Singh owes his political career to Indira Gandhi. Gandhi considered her choice of Singh, a Sikh, to be an overture to the militant Sikh community. India's first President without a command of English, Singh has been quoted as saying the Nehru family should be "worshipped." [redacted]

Singh's election as President in July 1982 strengthened Gandhi's already strong control over Indian politics. She undoubtedly believes that she can count on Singh's loyalty to keep her family in power. Although his office is largely symbolic and ceremonial, India's President is potentially powerful. As Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, he could call out the Army in times of political instability. The Sikhs form a critical element of the military, and Singh and Gandhi can depend on their support. [redacted]

Minister of Finance Mukherjee is the senior and perhaps one of the more competent members of Gandhi's Cabinet, and we believe he was appointed to office both for his proven loyalty to Gandhi and his Cabinet experience. Mukherjee advises the Prime Minister on domestic political matters. During her visit to the United States in July-August 1982, Gandhi entrusted him with presiding over Cabinet meetings. [redacted]

According to US Embassy sources, Mukherjee depends entirely on Gandhi for his political future. Mukherjee's continued influence and favor in the Cabinet depend largely on the success of Gandhi's liberalization policies. As senior Cabinet member, Mukherjee is in line for appointment as interim prime minister should Gandhi die in office. Although leftist critics accuse him of a proindustry bias and of promoting the private sector, as Minister of Revenue and Banking in 1975-77 he was regarded as anti-industry. [redacted]

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P. V. Narasimha Rao

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Minister of External Affairs Narasimha Rao has limited power in the Cabinet and lacks a national constituency, but he is widely admired and respected in the Congress Party. For that reason he could emerge as a darkhorse candidate for prime minister after Gandhi's unexpected death or retirement. Rao's impact on Indian policy formulation is minimized by Gandhi's direct involvement in foreign affairs decisionmaking. Although critical of what he perceives as the developed nations' failure to implement economic proposals, Rao favors India's move away from the Soviet Union.



Arun K. Nehru

Camera Press ©

Rajiv Gandhi's chief adviser and a member of parliament from the traditional Nehru family seat of Rae Bareli in Uttar Pradesh, Nehru wields considerable political power. According to published reports, "he summons ministers, sometimes with a wave of his finger . . . to discuss governmental matters with him." Because of his influence with both Rajiv and Gandhi, he is often described as "third prime minister."

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Nehru's flamboyant style contrasts sharply with that of his cousin, Rajiv, whose 1981 parliamentary campaign Nehru managed. According to political analysts in the US Embassy, Nehru has assumed a more low-key role since the Indian press began to compare Rajiv unfavorably with him. Nehru was reportedly blamed by Gandhi after Congress's lackluster showing in the 1982 state assembly elections in which Nehru played an important advisory role. A main theme on the New Delhi cocktail circuit is that the Nehru dynasty will continue after the Prime Minister with a Nehru, not a Gandhi.

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H. N. Bahuguna

India Today

President of the newly formed Democratic Socialist Party, Bahuguna at 63 is perhaps the most capable, experienced, and crafty of Gandhi's non-Communist adversaries. Bahuguna is a key figure in Indian politics because of his former standing in the Congress Party and past close relationship with Gandhi. Before his resignation as Commerce Minister from Gandhi's Emergency Government Cabinet in 1977, Bahuguna presided as chief minister over Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, where he has retained a popular following.

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Bahuguna bitterly opposes Gandhi and has led parliament against the Congress Party. His election to parliament in May 1982 was a sharp disappointment for Gandhi, who campaigned hard against him. Bahuguna's natural leadership, organizational ability, personal charisma, and populist image almost surely bother Gandhi, who must see him as a potential architect of a united coalition against Congress in the 1985 parliamentary elections and a rival of Rajiv. Bahuguna's name is often mentioned as a figure likely to return to the Congress fold and a position of leadership in the post-Gandhi era

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